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A Failed [yet successful narrative] Review of D. Jean Clandinin's Engaging in Narrative Inquiry

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Abstract

What happens when an overwhelmed, yet hungry for qualitative immersion, well-intentioned person [me] attempts to review a very thoughtful and well-done book on narrative inquiry [Clandinin, 2013]? Evidently an autobiographical narrative inquiry takes place. Well let me tell you the story...you'll laugh, you'll cry...I did anyway.

Keywords

narrative inquiry, story, review of the reviewer, commonplaces, situations

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A Failed [yet successful narrative] Review of D. Jean Clandinin's *Engaging in Narrative Inquiry*

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What happens when an overwhelmed, yet hungry for qualitative immersion, well-intentioned person [me] attempts to review a very thoughtful and well-done book on narrative inquiry [Clandinin, 2013]? Evidently an autobiographical narrative inquiry takes place. Well let me tell you the story...you'll laugh, you'll cry...I did anyway. Key Words: narrative inquiry, story, review of the reviewer, commonplaces, situations

I'm jotting [relying on memory reconstruction] this review down on notepaper I found in my purse between:

picking up my son [sociality commonplace]
from school [place commonplace]
taking him to the library [place]
and making him dinner [temporality and place commonplaces].

I've retreated to my bedroom [place] to type this up, read and review at the same time. I wish I had taken pictures of all the places this book has been with me in the 6 months or so [ok more like 9 months now] I have had it to read and review it like the NJ Transit Midtown Direct train, a Disney cruise to the Bahamas, my last business trip to Ft. Worth and in most every room and each and every table, desk and nightstand in my home [place, place, place]. To be honest, the only reason the book is getting any attention tonight is because I PROMISED to send something in to Adam Rosenthal [sociality] by tomorrow...the ides of March [temporality].

Honestly, I struggled with the introduction of the book, not because of the writing, which is clear but because it forced me out of my comfort zone. I had to consider references in the literature I didn't know and work to put them into context. While the first chapter was dense, I can't blame that for my slow progress for the first 7 months [temporality] I had the book. Once I broke the sound barrier of the introduction things moved along more smoothly, at least I could take in the content without stressing my generally overtaxed and "qualitatively underutilized" brain.

Why you may ask is my perfectly appropriately trained brain "qualitatively underutilized"? Although, I conduct research for a very respectable and rigorous social policy research firm, my qualitative brain cells haven't been active in a long while. I make attempts from time-to-time, as I go through the work of "implementation research" within a largely "impact" world, to do real qualitative work. However, honestly most of the things I have done in the last 13 years can hardly be called in-depth qualitative research. My work, as good as it is, certainly could not be compared to the type of inquiry described in this book—work that is reflective on both those being "researched" and the "researcher" within the inquiry. Why not? *There is no room for that in the deliverable. Too subjective. No one wants to pay for that, so it's not been budgeted. Where is the "bang" for the "buck"?*

I entered the profession in order to "translate" the challenging lived experiences of the poor and disenfranchised to policymakers, to give them voice, to help tell their "truth to

power”. But effectively I have just told the stories of implementing programs with a few “golden quotes” from those directly impacted by these programs sprinkled in for flavor. And “I” never appear in the narrative. So you’ll have to forgive me [or not] for my true qualitative muscles are atrophied after almost 13 years of dis-use.

As I explore the narrative of my own experience in reading this book for review I can say emphatically that it was an emotional experience for me...especially if guilt is an emotion. I felt terrible not to be able to give this fine work its just due as would some imaginary academic I’m comparing myself to. Someone without the crazy life I have single parenting, working more than full-time as a social policy researcher, being a serial entrepreneur, transformational coach, community organizer, spiritual journeywoman, community leader, and frustrated landlord, as well as amenable ex-wife, dater, and lover. Normal academics would probably have been able to delve into the depths of the work and make appropriate APA-style references to the texts referenced throughout the book and others on narrative inquiry. Since this is the first book I’ve knowingly read on narrative inquiry in at least 20 years and maybe ever, I can’t do that.

When the author writes, “We are, as inquirers, studying ourselves in relation as well.” It is like she is writing about me, and what I have chosen to do here. Navel gaze at my experience, failed, of reviewing her book. She succeeds in her goal of teaching one to engage in narrative inquiry with me. It has been my [obviously unedited] intention to narrate the experience I had in conducting the review. I certainly lived alongside myself, month after month that I didn’t read the book [again the introduction was HARD for me]. And I really wanted to, but there is work, and basketball, violin, swimming, homework, dinner, cleaning, paying bills, keeping up with my mom, putting out fires here there and everywhere that kept getting in my way.

To think two connected thoughts has been a luxury for me of late. Let alone sitting and reading through a whole book. Travel and work trips didn’t help either, as those are jam packed [Have you been on a Disney cruise?]. Anyway now, on my vacation, the last day before I promised to turn in this review in I am holed up in my room trying to ignore the sounds of video games and the Disney channel or Nickelodeon’s “Kickin’ It”. I turn away from the fact that it is past my son’s bedtime and he is benefitting from my shut-in status. I refuse to notice that there is a pile of laundry on my feet that needs folding and putting away. I push down the realization that I’m getting sleepy too. That’s me situated dead center in the narrative of my review of this wonderful book.

The many examples [some skimmed, I’m sorry] in the middle of the book provide ample fodder for the curious qualitative researcher to learn more about HOW to do narrative inquiry, what it looks, feels, smells and tastes like. That is useful to someone inclined to like stories, details and examples, like many qualitative researchers, if they’re anything like me. There in the middle of the book are all the things I love and all the things that drew me to qualitative methods in the first place: raw transcripts, field notes, analytic elements and polished narrative products. It’s gorgeous.

As I wind down I think that I could have my 8 year old enter a response community with me to review my work before I email this thing off, but he’s more of a four-square, Minecraft, math puzzle sort of a kid, so I don’t think that’s going to work out. Cheers!

Reference

Clandinin, D. J. (2013). *Engaging in narrative inquiry*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press.

Author Note

I'm Alissa Dawn Gardenhire, Ph.D. [from Harvard, no less!] and I'm a failed book reviewer. I live and love a life in constant negotiation between what I'm called to do, required to do and want to do. I wanted to do this review and am glad I did. I seek more opportunities to engage qualitatively or become a housewife, or a world-renowned metaphysician, or a social justice crusader, or professional gardener, or suburban revolutionary, or stand up comedienne, or maybe I'll just build a sustainable house off the grid somewhere and homeschool my son. We'll see. My latest entrepreneurial venture connects academic subject matter and content experts with social policy research firms to supplement and support large research efforts. You can always reach me at Alissa@RADalyst.com.

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